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ABSTRACT

Conservative critics have complained that United States universities harbor radical professors who have perverted the curriculum, infringed on student rights, and undermined the idea of liberal education in support of "multiculturalism" or "cultural diversity." However, one possible aim of multicultural education is the "production" of a political and economic intelligentsia capable of promoting "the American way of life" as it competes with other ways of living. Another justification is that cultural diversity, and the awareness of difference that follows the acknowledgement of diversity, might hold the potential for inspiring social change. The struggle over multiculturalism is nothing less than an attempt to determine which vision of a future world educators wish to promote, what sort of politics educators wish to engage. Academics and others with an interest in the future of higher education should seek out new pedagogies suitable for the post-modern university. Such pedagogies would ideally seek to retain a vision of a world somehow better than it currently is, without seeking to privilege any final, master version of that emancipatory vision. (Twenty-seven references are attached.) (RS)

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SO MANY CULTURES, SO LITTLE TIME: AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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It is unusual for the chairs of a panel to author a paper. But this is an unusual panel (in form and, perhaps, in substance), and these are unusual times. Across the United States the university is under attack. In widely read newspapers and magazines, various authors, a few of whom have impressive academic and intellectual credentials, have argued that something is deeply wrong with present trends in university pedagogy. Little internecine squabbling has taken place among these conservative critics; they speak almost as with one voice. Even their examples are often identical. (It is to be expected, of course, that the relatively few "extreme" examples of university offenses would be used in the effort of these critics to convey the seriousness of the alleged problem.)

It is also important to understand that the particular institutions which are attacked are not small, regional colleges and universities still trying to escape the lingering effects of blatant discrimination on the basis of race and sex. These problems -- unequal funding for traditionally minority state institutions, for examples -- still exist, but they are not the subject of this critique of the academy. Instead, the schools under attack by the right wing are widely perceived to be among the best in the United States. Duke, the University of California at Berkeley, Dartmouth, Stanford, the University of Michigan, Brown, the University of Pennsylvania and other institutions with highly respected academic reputations have all come under fire.

Conservative criticism of university practices is, unsurprisingly, not new. Conservatives complained that U.S. universities were hotbeds of aberrant liberalism even before the nineteen sixties. These criticisms ranged from the ironic to the apocalyptic to the irreverent (for the latter, see Professor X [1973]). Yet there is a new immediacy to the conservative challenge. Not only are university faculty "out of touch" with "basic

American values," critics now charge these same "radicals" with perverting the curriculum. The "great books" have been thrown out, and faddish but intellectually inferior material has replaced them. The constitutional rights of students have been infringed. Recent trends in literary and rhetorical criticism undermine the idea of liberal education. And all of this has been done in the support of "multiculturalism," or "cultural diversity," which has been imposed on (sometimes unwilling) students.

Perhaps we overstate and/or distort the conservative position. We find substantial textual evidence, however, to support our characterization. In a lengthy opinion piece in The Chronicle of Higher Education, former Reagan Administration official Linda Chavez (1990) attacked the idea of cultural diversity, arguing that "my own experience with the promoters of this new ideology [cultural diversity] suggests that their real aim is to keep out certain ideas and certain people, to foreclose debate, to substitute their own catechism for the free inquiry usually associated with a university." (p. B1). She concluded by warning that "the cultural pluralists have embarked on a dangerous course.... Let's hope that academic freedom can survive the assault" (Chavez, 1990, p. B2). John Taylor (1991) charges that "this [politically correct] demand for intellectual conformity, enforced with harassment and intimidation, has led some observers to compare the atmosphere in universities today to that of Germany in the 1930's." (p. 101). Newsweek (Taking Offense, 1990) expresses its own concern regarding the campus "thought police": "What is distressing is that at the university, of all places, tolerance has to be imposed rather than taught, and that 'progress' so often is just the replacement of one repressive orthodoxy by another" (p. 49). University of Pennsylvania undergraduate Debra Cormele (1991) complains in Campus that "if today's students are exposed only to the new trends in academia, the only idea they will absorb is that they themselves are either victims or perpetrators of oppression... They

will come to 'realize' that only people with the same genitals and melanin concentrations can understand each other" (p. 7). Finally, Sykes and Miner (1991) announce that "prohibitions on free speech... are imposed de jure and de facto; first by rules, frequently referred to as "anti-harassment codes, and then by fear, usually as willing (sometimes unwilling) conformity with 'politically correct' thinking" (p. 31).

Perhaps the most striking passage comes from Dinesh D'Souza's (1991) Atlantic Monthly article.

> By the time these [current] students graduate, many colleges and universities will not have met their need for all-round development. Instead by precept and example, they will have taught them that all rules are unjust and all preferences are principled; that justice is simply the will of the stronger party; that standards and values are arbitrary, and the ideal of the educated person is largely a figment of bourgeois white male ideology;... that convenient myths and well-intentioned lies can substitute for truth; that double standards are acceptable as long as they are enforced to the benefit of minority victims;... and that a multiracial society cannot be based on fair rules that apply to every person but must rather be held together with a forced rationing of power among separatist racial groups. In short, instead of liberal education, which many American students are getting is its diametrical opposite: an education in closed-mindedness and intolerance -- which is to say, illiberal education (p. 79).

Opponents of the "politically correct" (PC) have responded on campus, as well. [1] The National Association of Scholars (NAS) was founded in 1987 by mostly conservative academics who had become disgruntled with the apparent success of the PC. Taylor (1991) briefly and uncritically describes the NAS as "dedicated to upholding rational scholarship

and academic freedom" (p. 104). Their position regarding neo-Marxist criticism, academic feminism, and other intellectual currents associated with PC, however, is made quite clear by their membership: This (radical) scholarship isn't rational. As one commentator noted, NAS members sometimes diverge from the "Western" traditions which they wish to affirm. "In conversation, members of the... [NAS] blur the distinction between vigorous debate about the ideas that undergird Western democracy and agreement with those ideas. They want students to ask basic questions but object when the answers derived are not the 'right' ones" (Weisberg, 1991, p. 38).

At least some of the ideas of alleged PC academics have non-academic defenders. Wickham (1991), who writes for the Gannett foundation, calls D'Souza and his ilk "cultural isolationists," and concludes that "it cannot harm students who spent most of their primary and secondary educations immersed in the student of Western culture to take a few college-level courses to explore the culture of others" (p. 7A). In her effort to find a middle position in the opposition between PC and conservative criticism, Ehrenreich (1991, p. 84) suggests in Time magazine that "both sides would be well advised to lighten up," and ultimately embraces the principle of multicultural education. The conservative warnings listed above, and others like them in tone and urgency, now appear in many popular media outlets, however, and legislators like United States Representative Henry Hyde of Illinois, inspired by these conservative charges, have even begun to propose laws to correct the alleged problems (Buckley, 1991).

Considering the widespread complaints regarding PC excesses and "oppression studies," a cursory review of the justifications for multicultural education seems in order. Below we briefly outline a few of the arguments made in favor of cultural diversity in the university.

Aspirations to Cultural Diversity

Why has "multicultural" education becomes so popular a cause in the academy? In order to understand this phenomenon, we will briefly review some of the rationales which have been offered for the emphasis on campus diversity.

The first justification which we sketch here has received such widespread attention that it requires little explication. In an era of instantaneous communication networks reaching to virtually every nation-state around the world, networks made possible by twentieth century technical advances (Lasswell, 1980), an insensitivity to intercultural differences by business and political leaders may potentially be disastrous, as Edward Hall (1959) explains to us in his widely read book, The Silent Language. Larson (1989) notes in his popular persuasion text that "whether or not we realize it, we are trapped by our own culture" (p. 220). Professor Gail Shepherd notes:

> The expansion of the curriculum to include "Third World" cultures, race relations, media theory, feminist and gay studies, etc., is a legitimate, hopeful academic response to the challenges of late-twentieth century global and local navigation--a response akin to the invention of the compass (1991, p. 24).

Negotiating these problems in intercultural communication have led to increasing study of communication and culture within our own discipline (see Casmir, 1991; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Shuter, 1990), although, as Shuter (1990) points out, "researchers in communication who conduct intercultural research do not generally exhibit in their published studies a passion for culture" (p. 237). Rather, they have tended to focus on other cultures primarily as laboratories for the confirmation or invalidation of communication theories.

Whatever the failing of scholars working in our own discipline, however, the attention paid to the United States as one nation-state among many others competing in a "global marketplace" has been considerable. As Shuter (1990) asserts "culture is the single most important global communication issue in the 1990s. New cultural coalitions and alliances are redefining global relationships" (p. 241). University students are poorly served if we fail to make them aware of (and even receptive to) intercultural differences which they almost certainly must confront at some point during their careers. The utility of a multicultural approach is even more apparent if, as Koester and Lustig (1991, p. 250) characterize the current era, "cultural pluralism... is beginning to characterize U.S. higher education," since our student populations appear to be increasingly diverse across many demographic categories. In fact, our society as a whole will continue to become more diverse. Most Americans will be non-European descent by the turn of the century (Fead, 1989).

One possible aim of multicultural education, the most attractive justification from the point of view of those defending Western culture, is the "production" of a political and economic intelligentsia capable of promoting our own dominant culture ("the [U.S.-] American way of life") as it competes with other ways of living. As Brembeck and Howell (1976) conclude their chapter on the "cultural bases of persuasion," "the mode of life we prefer can compete in the world market only if it is advanced by effective persuasion" (p. 224; their emphasis).

But another justification for cultural diversity is unabashedly emancipatory, to the extent that it goes far beyond the other alleged instrumental virtues of multiculturalism. From this leftist-political perspective, it may be argued that diversity, and the awareness of difference that follows the acknowledgment of diversity, might hold the potential for

inspiring social change. When individuals become aware that divergent ways of "doing" and "knowing" exist, ways other than their own, it becomes possible for those individuals to question their own practices, which may previously have been the "only" way(s) of proceeding. Multiculturalism does not want to outright replace contemporary culture, rather it strives to increase dialogue about alternate ways of "doing" and "knowing." Professor of African history Thomas Spear argues that the multiculturalism movement does not represent "a wholesale effort to purge [straight] white males and the whole Western tradition from the university;" it provides "exciting opportunities to expand, notlimit, our views by adding previously unrepresented perspectives by women, minorities, and non-Westerners that allow us to see our society, our history, and our works of art in the round" (1991, p. 19).

Such intercultural experiences might increase the willingness of individuals to question their own practices as well as the practices of others, and cultural change might proceed from this exploration of the phronesis (practical wisdom) which dominates the contemporary culture. When we find that other ways might be better, for example, and discover that our own government, and the culture which supports that government and is supported in turn by it, reject those alternatives without "good reasons," we then have the (newfound) power to criticize this oversight. There may be a better way. One portion of Berthoff's (1990) gloss of Paulo Freire's "liberation pedagogy" is illuminating: "When people learn that their misery and suffering are not necessary, that they are not God's will or the inevitable pattern of nature, their liberation has begun. Naming the world, speaking a true word, thus becomes the model... for cultural action for freedom" (p. 366).

When students and others "broaden their horizons" as they become aware of alternative cultures, they are expected to become more receptive to discourse which is

critical of their own cultures. Social change seems less unreasonable, and visions of different realities become more appealing. Not all individuals find the criticism persuasive or compelling but a substantial number of them should, it is imagined, become more open to the critical message.

The difficulty for this position is that the "true word," as Berthoff expresses herself, is so easily smothered, or is, at least, unheard against the incessant talk of the dominant culture. Defenders of the status quo argue in particular that the "truth" is that emancipatory discourse(s) is(are) unrealistic, "Utopian," or absurd. The examination of the role of truth in the controversy over multicultural education we will leave for another time. The competing stories of the "conservative" and "liberal" intellectuals in higher education, however, do require this observation: The is/ought distinction made by Hume and many others seems to be at the center of these different justifications for cultural diversity in the university. The conservative story implies diversity is a practical reality, which students must recognize and account for in their everyday lives. Our world IS diverse. The liberal-left story has an emancipatory theme, in which the argument calls for MORE diversity, for alternative modes of thought which escape the instrumental reality of a thoroughly bureaucratized and technologized world. The world OUGHT to change, and multiculturalism could be a force for positive social evolution.

But an OUGHT is also present in the conservative story. For the conservative critics of contemporary multicultural curricula wish to support and advance their own particular worldview(s), just as surely as do the liberal advocates of cultural diversity. The IS of diversity is more-or-less recognized by all participants in this debate. The struggle over multiculturalism is nothing less than an attempt to determine which vision of a future world we wish to promote, what sort of politics we want to engage. The resistance to an

alteration of the lifeworld as it is currently constituted -- an alteration to which many multiculturalists and their "modern" and "postmodern" intellectual mentors are committed -- may help explain why popular press reaction to PC thinking is so hostile. "Their [critics of PC] hyperpoles are unreflective and insidious. They fuel, not correctives to what they see as closed discourse, but backlash, defensiveness, and dismissal" (Pollock & Cox, 1991, p. 171).

Conclusion

If, as Lyotard (1984) and many others assert, we live in a world marked by the fragmentation of discourse and the master narratives which discourse helps to reproduce, it is time to confront that fragmentation. To describe the world as it exists for us is not enough. Following a better-known McGee's (1990, p. 278) decree that it is "time to stop whining about the so-called 'post-modern condition' and to develop realistic strategies to cope with it as a fact of human life," we would call upon academics and others with an interest in the future of higher education to seek out new pedagogies suitable for the post-modern university. Briefly, it seems to us that these new pedagogies would ideally seek to retain a vision of a world somehow better than it currently is, without seeking to privilege any final, master version of that emancipatory vision. The resolution of the contradiction implied in the previous sentence is precisely the problematic which confronts us. We look forward with considerable interest to the scholarship of the coming years regarding this challenge.

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Endnotes

[1] It is ironic, of course, that the label "politically correct" is taken so seriously by conservative critics. After all, the ideas of the "radical" academics associated with PC are far from politically correct when compared with the prevailing political conventions in the United States, where racism and sexism still exert considerable influence and political conservatism has dominated both major political parties for many years. The conservative critics, however, don't "get" the joke. For a summation of the "politics of race" as articulated recently in the popular press, see Edsall and Edsall (1991).